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ABSTRACT

This research examined the developmental progression of child and youth care students in practicum placements and teaching strategies used by practicum supervisors according to their practicum students' developmental levels. Eight university practicum supervisors participated in a focus group regarding their perceptions of differences between beginning and experienced practicum students and the concomitant supervisory approaches effective with each group. Supervisors perceived differences in students' ability levels, autonomy, self-confidence, and reflection. They utilized strategies of modeling and direct instruction for beginning students and those of facilitation and advocacy for experienced students. Findings were used to develop a student survey. Over 90 practicum students completed this survey, which examined their perceptions of practicum goals, practicum components, and characteristics deemed most desirable for on-site placement supervisors and university supervisors. Results revealed that experienced students attributed more importance to self-evaluation, were less reliant on seminars held at the university, were more committed to self-direction and independence, and were more aware of the importance of practicum in developing professional competence than were beginning students. Experienced students ranked focusing on children as the most important practicum goal more often than beginning students. Beginning students perceived the goal of improving their practicum performance more important than did advanced students. (Contains 16 references.) (SM)

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Developmentally Appropriate Practicum Supervision: Perceptions of Students and Supervisors

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ABSTRACT:

The focus of this research is the developmental progression of child and youth care students in practicum placements, and teaching strategies used by practicum supervisors according to their practicum students' developmental levels. Eight university practicum supervisors participated in a focus group to discuss their perceptions of differences between beginning and experienced practicum students, and the concomitant supervisory approaches effective with each respective group. Focus group findings were that supervisors perceived differences in students' ability levels, autonomy, self-confidence and reflection. Supervisors utilized strategies of modelling and direct instruction for beginning students, and those of facilitation and advocacy for experienced students. These findings were used to develop a student survey. Ninety-two practicum students (50 beginning and 42 experienced) completed this survey pertaining to their perceptions of practicum goals, the various components of practicum, and characteristics deemed most desirable for on-site placement supervisors and university supervisors. Survey findings revealed that experienced students attributed more importance to self-evaluation, were less reliant on seminars held at the university, were more committed to self-direction and independence, and were more aware of the importance of practicum in developing professional competence than were the beginning students. Experienced students ranked focussing on children as the most important practicum goal more often than beginning students, and beginning students perceived the goal of improving their practicum performance as more important than did the advanced students. The research findings are discussed within the theoretical framework of developmental stages in practicum, and the accompanying supervisory strategies.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between practicum supervisors and their students has changed considerably during the past decade. Prior to the 1990's the primary role for supervisors was to observe student performance and to offer suggestions to change students' teaching behaviours and practices, while today the main task of supervisors is to help students engage in a critical reflection of their practicum experiences (Siens & Ebmeier, 1996). The supervisory spot checks from the past decade have been replaced by constructive supervisory feedback and reflective discussion between practicum supervisors and their students. The power dynamics have changed from all-knowing supervisors and inept students to that of the experienced supervisors and "developing" practicum students. Today supervisors and their students embark on the practicum journey together, with reflective discussion and meaningful collaboration as their guide. This shift in supervisory power creates more egalitarian supervisor-student relationships, whereby students are recognized as having more ownership in what they learn and extract from their practicum experiences. The new buzzwords for effective practicum supervision are "critically reflective thinking/practice" and "developmental supervision".

Developmental supervision is used when supervisors match their style of assistance to teachers and/or practicum students' developmental levels (Glickman, 1981; Glickman & Gordon, 1987; Gordon, 1990). Research on developmental progression in teacher education, early childhood education and practicum training indicates that practitioners mature in their professional thinking, and that qualitative differences in professional thinking exist between beginning and experienced practitioners (Bloom, Sheerer,& Britz, J., 1991; Glickman, 1990; Kagan, 1992; McDermott, Gormley, Rothenberg & Hammer, 1995; Siens & Ebmeir, 1996).

Novice practitioners generally lack self-confidence and experience, and they require a high degree of direct supervisory support and a low degree of challenge and confrontation (Hart, 1994). More experienced practitioners focus on advanced skills and issues, and supervisors empower them to become more independent. At the advanced stages of supervision, the supervisor assumes a role similar to that of a colleague (Hart, 1994).

The focus of this conference presentation is a research study on developmental supervision conducted in a child and youth study program at a Canadian University. The objective of this research was to document whether the developmental levels for practicum students in child and youth care programs follow the same developmental progression as found for education students. Education students in teacher training programs typically complete a series of practicum placements in school-based settings. The commonalities inherent in classroom structure and routines provide these students with a point of reference in progression from one classroom practicum to the next. In contrast, most students in child and youth care training programs complete a variety of diverse practicum placements; including field experiences in child care centres, elementary school classrooms, programs designed for children with special needs, child life departments in hospitals, and residential and community-based programs for youth. The outcome of the present research provides an indication as to whether student developmental levels and developmental supervision in education programs are applicable to the child and youth care training programs. The session today will begin with a discussion of the theoretical frameworks for critical reflection and developmental supervision, followed by a presentation of the research study.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Critical Reflection

Current supervisory methods encourage students' reflective thinking through problem reframing (Gordon, 1992; Pultorak, 1996). According to Schon (1983), practictioners engage in critically reflective thinking by the process of problem reframing; new problems encountered in practice are reframed in terms of familiar analogies and situations in order to achieve resolution. This theoretical framework is suitable for interpreting students' perceptions of practicum as they encounter a variety of new problems, act on these problems and then reflect on their actions. Reflective thinking is situated in a variety of contexts during practicum. Hyan and Marshall (1996) described three dimensions of reflective practice in teacher education; reflection-in-action, reflection-on-action, and reflection-for-action.

- *Reflection-in-action* refers to the personal and professional decisions made independently by practicum students during the course of the day, with no consultation from others. Students use "cognitive reflective thinking" during reflection-in-action, relying on personal experiential background, intuition, and information from academic courses . On-site observations and journal entries pertaining to specific experiences encountered by students in practicum provide the windows for supervisors to view their students engaged in reflection-in-action.
- *Reflection-on-action* is shared communication between students and others, wherein students' perceptions of specific practicum episodes are examined more fully. This shared communication between supervisors and their students is generally in the form of written narratives in practicum journals and verbal narratives during conferences and seminars.

The narrative element of reflection expands student understanding of their practicum experiences and enables them to reflect on their professional progress.

- *Reflection- for-action* is the process whereby practicum students incorporate what they have learned through cognitive and narrative reflections into higher-level professional decision-making and implementation. Practicum supervisors assist students in analysing a variety of perspectives in order to choose the professional action that best meets the individual situation. Reflection-for-action is the most desirable form of reflective practice.

Developmental Supervision

Various models of development in teacher education, early childhood education and practicum training illustrate how practitioners mature in their professional thinking (Glickman, 1990; Kagan,1992). Three general developmental stages emerge from a synthesis of these models; the initial *ego-centric/survival stage,* the middle *child-centred stage*, and the *professional/reflective* stage. Several position papers in early teacher education have suggested guidelines for developmentally appropriate supervision, whereby supervisors adapt their supervision styles to meet practitioners' reflective developmental levels (Hyan & Marshall, 1996; Siens & Ebmeir, 1996). These supervision styles suggest a *directive supervisory style* for novices, a *collaborate supervisory approach* for intermediate practicum students, and a *facilitative/reflective supervisory style* for experienced students. A brief description of practicum stages and appropriate supervisory methods follow.

- The initial ego-centric stage and directive supervision. During the initial stage practitioners focus more on themselves and their performance than on the children in

their care. They have very specific needs which require immediate attention, and are concerned with their "survival" in the practicum setting (Baptiste & Sheerer, 1997). Novice practitioners have difficulty in identifying problems and generating alternative solutions (Siens & Ebmeir, 1996). Students seek structure and direction and view their supervisors as experts from whom they are seeking concrete advise. Supervisors make many of the decisions pertaining to practica and provide solutions to problems encountered in the practicum milieu. Supervisory accessibility and supportive understanding help alleviate student self-doubt.

- The middle child-centred stage and collaborative supervision. A shift from self-absorption to reflection concerning the children, group dynamics, interpersonal communication and curriculum planning is evident during the middle practitioner stage. Students identify problems and generate alterative solutions, but need help in priorizing solutions and thinking through consequences (Siens & Ebmeier, 1996). Supervisors are viewed as collaborative partners with whom students share responsibilities for practicum decisions through mutual discussions of perceived problems. Goals for practicum are mutually generated and reflective student self-evaluation is encouraged.
- The professional reflective stage and facilitative/reflective supervision. Practitioners in the final reflective stage focus on moral and ethical issues encountered through examination of their values and beliefs, and they begin to forge a synthesis between their personal and professional identities. These practitioners are eager to be challenged, recognize the importance of teamwork and collaboration, and strive for autonomy in their decision-making (Sheerer, 1997). Students are encouraged by their supervisors to

function independently and to engage in reflective thought whereby they grapple with moral/ethical issues, and integrate their personal and professional identities. At times this entails supervisors adopting an advocacy role in the placement to ensure that students are able to assume appropriate levels of autonomy.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The focus of this research was the developmental progression of child and youth care students in practicum placements, and teaching strategies used by practicum supervisors according to their practicum students' developmental levels. This research investigated developmental levels in first and final year child and youth care practicum students, students' perceptions' of developmental supervision appropriate to their practicum stage, university practicum supervisors' perceptions of student developmental levels and developmentally appropriate supervision, and whether child and youth care students experience the same developmental progression found in the literature for students enrolled in teacher training programs. The following research questions were addressed;

1. Do child and youth care students who have participated in extensive practica think differently about their practical training experiences than students beginning their first practicum placements?
2. Are there differences between beginning and experienced practicum students' perceptions of the characteristics deemed most desirable for their placement supervisors and university supervisors?
3. Do university supervisors recognize distinct developmental levels in their students and adjust their supervisory styles accordingly?

4. Do university students enrolled in child and youth care training programs experience the same developmental progression found in the research on practicum in teacher education programs?

METHOD

Participants

Survey participants were practicum students enrolled in a Canadian university degree child and youth study program in the 2000 - 2001 academic year. Students in this program complete a minimum of 500 practicum hours in four sequential practicum placements. The program is located in a mid-size urban location and is four years in duration. The total sample size was 92 students (50 beginning and 42 experienced). Beginning students were enrolled in Practicum 1 and experienced students in Practicum 4. Practicum 1 is completed in elementary schools and child care facilities. In Practicum 4 students work with children and/or youth in a variety of settings; including schools, child care centres, developmental centres, recreational programs, hospitals, and residential facilities. Four of the students were male, and 87% were between the ages of 17 - 22 years.

Focus group participants were 8 university supervisors (7 females and 1 male). All supervisors had at least three years of supervisory experience in the child and youth care program, and had supervised both beginning and final year students in a variety of settings.

Procedures

A focus group for faculty members teaching practicum in the fall term of 2000 - 2001 was held prior to the beginning of practicum. The university supervisors were informed that findings from their focus group discussion would be used in the development of a student survey on

practicum. The proceedings were audio-taped and transcribed, and a letter of consent was signed by each participant prior to the audio-taping. Focus group participants received a copy of the draft survey and were encouraged to provide feedback for the final instrument.

The survey was completed in the 2000 - 2001 academic year. Students enrolled in Practicum 1 completed the survey at the end of the third week of classes, and those in Practicum 4 during the final week of classes. Students in Practicum 1 had completed approximately 40 hours of practicum, compared to those in Practicum 4 with approximately 500 hours. A research assistant explained the purpose of the research, and administered the questionnaires during the last thirty minutes of required academic classes. Students were assured of anonymity and handed in the completed survey at the end of each class. Only students currently enrolled in practicum completed the questionnaire. Students who completed the survey were invited to participate in follow-up interviews, and signed a letter of permission which was attached to the questionnaire. Findings from the interviews are in the preliminary stages of analysis.

Measures

Focus group. The following questions provided the framework for the focus group discussion;

- Do you think that students develop progressive skills as they move through their practicum placements?
- What do you perceive as the major differences between students in Practicum 1 and Practicum 4?
- Do you find that your role differs when you supervise beginning and experienced

practicum students? If "yes", how does your role differ?

- What factors other than previous practicum experience contribute to students' developmental levels?

The focus group proceedings were qualitatively analysed using a content analysis consistent with the framework for developmental supervision. Findings from the focus group, together with research findings on development stages of practicum and developmentally appropriate supervision, were used in the development of the student survey. Focus group interviews can be particularly useful in development of hypotheses and instruments (Vaughn, Schymm & Sinagub, 1996).

Survey . The survey included twenty-two Likert-type questions pertaining to various aspects of students' perceptions of practicum experiences; including student goals, evaluation procedures, written assignments, seminars, and the role of supervisors. The questions were written in statement form, and students responded by circling one of the following responses; "strongly agree", "agree", "uncertain", "disagree", "strongly disagree". The category of uncertain was used because beginning students had completed only three weeks of practicum. Four ranking question on the survey addressed practicum goals and student perceptions of characteristics deemed most important for placement and university supervisors. Each ranking questions was followed by an open-ended section for student elaboration. Demographic information on age, family status, work and volunteer experience, and previous journal writing was also included.

T-tests were used to assess differences between beginning and final year students in their responses to the Likert-type items on the survey. Significance levels were set at $p<.05$. Descriptive statistics were employed in analysis of ranking questions and demographics. A

qualitative analysis was used for open-ended responses pertaining to practicum goals, using categories established by Yarrow (1994).

RESULTS

Focus Group. All supervisors concurred that practicum students develop progressive skills, and that there are substantive differences between beginning and experienced students. However, individual differences in skill were noted within each level. Factors external to practicum such as previous work experience, prior exposure to evaluation, students' age/maturity level, sense of focus and self-confidence were noted as contributing to each student's individual practicum level. Focus group participants noted the following differences between students in Practicum 1 and Practicum 4;

- Knowledge of the placement milieu. Experienced students are familiar with the logistics and routines of practicum, such as the roles of supervisors, the intricacies of journal writing and the logistics of evaluations.
- Levels of responsibility. Experienced students assume more responsibility for all aspects of practicum, whereas beginning students expect the supervisor to assume responsibility.
- Levels of skill development. Experienced students have more highly developed practicum-related skills, particularly verbal and written communication skills.
- Personal traits. Beginning students tend to be initially nervous and shy, while experienced students exhibit self-confidence and initiative.
- Ecological Perspective. Beginning students have an ego-centric focus; they focus on their own performance, and specific tasks within their practica. Experienced students have a broader view of the placement milieu, its positioning within the child and youth care

community, and their emerging roles as child and youth care professionals.

- Perceptions of Evaluation. Beginning students are wary of evaluations, and focus on specific criticisms of their performance. In comparison, experienced students are confident and positive, using evaluations as learning tools to enhance the values of their experiences.

The focus group participants concurred that different strategies were necessary in their supervision of beginning and experienced students in order to maximize the value of practicum placements. They agreed that beginning students require more direct guidance and contact with their university supervisors than do experienced students in order to develop the requisite practicum skills. Supervisory methods of modelling, direct instruction, and screening were noted as appropriate for beginning students. Modelling was used to demonstrate how to interact with children, parents and team members in a variety of situations, and the modelling techniques of body language, eye contact and "giving students the words they need" were specifically noted. All supervisors spent considerable time instructing beginning students on the requirements and expectations for practicum, particularly with respect to written requirements of journals entries, observation assignments and written evaluations. Supervisors found their roles far more difficult with beginning than with experienced students in that the initial practicum is used to screen students out of the child and youth study program. A failure in practicum constitutes expulsion from the program.

The focus group supervisors reported very different supervisory methods for advanced students. They perceived their roles as advocates and facilitators as being most beneficial for Practicum 4 students. Less time was spent observing experienced students than beginning

students. Students were empowered to set their own practicum goals, and supervisors served as advocates to ensure that students were able to achieve these goals within the context of their practica. Supervisors facilitated critical reflection in both written assignments and collaborative discussion. Professionalism and ethics/values were noted as important topics for critical reflection.

In conclusion, the findings from the focus group discussion were similar to those found in the research and literature on teacher training and developmental supervision. Beginning practicum students in both education and child and youth care are more ego-centric and require a directive supervisory style, while advanced practicum students are more skilled and reflective and require a facilitative supervisory style.

Survey. Differences between beginning and experienced practicum students were found on five Likert-type questions, using t-tests and a significance level of $p < .05$. Two questions for which differences were found focussed on university supervisors, two on goals, and one on both placement and university supervisors. All five questions and a brief discussion for each follow.

The questions pertaining to university supervisors were; 1) "university supervisors' evaluations are more important than practicum students self evaluations" and 2) "conferences and seminars at the university are just as important as the practical components of practicum". Eighty-one percent (81%) of the experienced students and 58% of the beginning students disagreed with the evaluation statement. Beginning students attributed more importance to their university supervisors' evaluations than did the experienced students. Similarly, beginning students attributed more importance to supervisory conferences and seminars led by university supervisors compared to the experienced students. More than half of the novice students (52%)

and less than one third (31%) of the final year students agreed that supervisory conferences were just as important as the practical component of practicum. Taken together, these findings indicate that the beginning students were more reliant on input from their university supervisors than were the experienced students.

The goal-related questions for which differences were found were; 1) "one of the most important goals for practicum students is that they learn to work with minimal guidance and direction from their placement and university supervisors" and 2) "the most important goal for practicum students is that they develop professional competence". The vast majority (90%) of experienced students and less than two-thirds (62%) of the novice students agreed to the importance of minimal supervisory guidance. Experienced students were most committed to professional competence; 91% were in agreement (48% strongly agreed and 43% agreed) with the importance of this goal, in comparison with 80% agreement in beginning students (30% strongly agreed and 50% agreed). These goal-related findings are consistent with the focus group supervisors' perceptions that beginning students required more direction and instruction than experienced students, and that their facilitative role with experienced students is to encourage a high degree of professionalism.

The final Likert- type question for which differences were found was the following; " It is important for practicum supervisors to tell students what they should do in practicum". Nearly three quarters (74%) of the experienced students, while only 52% of the beginning students agreed with this statement. This finding appears to be contradictory to other survey responses whereby experienced students perceived supervisory guidance and input from university supervisors as less important than did the beginning students. Preliminary analysis of the

interview transcripts have revealed that experienced students indicated that they require a clear set of expectations at the beginning of their senior placement in order to establish a framework within which they can develop autonomy. Perhaps practicum supervisors are operating on incorrect assumptions that their advanced students are aware of explicit expectations in Practicum 4. These survey findings indicate that more specific supervisory direction is required during the initial weeks of the final practicum placement.

Differences were found on the ranking question pertaining to goals established by practicum students. Survey participants were asked to rank the following goals in order of importance; "to focus on children and youth", "to engage in reflection", and "to improve my performance". Experienced students ranked the goal of focussing on children/youth as their first choice more often than beginning students, 78% and 62% respectively. Novice students ranked the goal of improving performance as number one twice as often as advanced students, 32% and 16% respectively. The goal on reflection was a distant third choice, with only 6% from each group selecting it as their preferred goal.

Students were asked to write any further goals for practicum, and their responses were categorized using the classifications of personal and professional goals suggested by Yarrow (1994). Personal goals are those pertaining to generic personal qualities of an individual which influence their actions and can affect their interactions in social settings, such as classrooms. Professional goals include knowledge specific to practicum and the profession. Beginning students delineated both personal and professional goals. Personal goals included meeting new people, having fun and becoming more confident, and professional goals addressed curriculum development/ implementation and behaviour management. Experienced students did not list any

generic personal goals, and there professional goals were different from those of the beginning students. Team work, collaboration, developing a professional identity, creating networks, and learning to function independently were the goals stated by advanced students.

Findings from the quantitative and qualitative analysis of student goals revealed differences consistent with developmental practicum stage theory. Beginning students were found to be more egocentric in that they focussed more on their own performance than did the experienced students. A second indication of the novice's egocentrism was indicated by their choices of personal goals, in contrast to advanced students who listed only professional goals. The professional goals listed by each group revealed differences pertaining to the ecological perspective of practicum. Beginning students listed goals with a narrow perspective, relating to curriculum and procedures within the placement. Experienced students had a far broader perspective indicated by their written goals pertaining to networking and professionalism that transcended the immediate practicum setting, permeating into the entire professional milieu.

Follow-up interviews of twenty-nine participants will provide further information on all aspects of this research. Findings from a qualitative analysis of the three ranking questions pertaining to students' perceptions of characteristics deemed important for university and placement supervisors did not reveal any differences between beginning and experienced students. Although no significant differences were found on the survey, preliminary analysis of the interviews revealed a number of characteristics noted as important for each respective supervisory group.

In conclusion, the combined survey and focus group data in this research indicates that child and youth care students enrolled in a variety of practicum placements progress through

developmental stages similar to those found in the research for early childhood teacher education, and that the concomitant supervisory styles indicated in the teacher education literature are applicable to child and youth care practica. The commonalities inherent within practicum experiences in both education and child child care training programs, when accompanied by developmental supervision, empower students to progress sequentially in establishing more autonomous professional identities.

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